CREATION MYTH OF THE COCHANS (YUMA INDIANS): BY NATALIE CURTIS

On the banks of the Colorado River, a few miles north of Mexico and just at the boundary line of Southern California and Arizona, live the Yuma Indians, or "Cochans," as the Indians call themselves. The desert which stretches on each side of the river is their home. Amid the timber that follows the river's course—the cottonwood and mesquite trees, sage and cactus of the desert—the Cochans build their huts of cottonwood poles, plastered with mud and thatched with arrow-weed. The blue sky overhead is rarely darkened by a rain cloud; the treeless mountains cut their jagged outline sharp against the horizon, while the sand hills stretch tawny and golden beyond the green of the river bank.

The creation legend of the Cochans is ancient, but the interpolation of the white man is of course a later addition to the tale. According to the Cochans the white man is "in the west," for the first white men seen by the Yumas were the Spaniards who came from California, which at that time was still a part of Mexico. It will be seen throughout the legend that the Cochans believe that they themselves migrated to their present home from the north.

PEOPLE! Behold, thus it was in the beginning:—
All was water; there was no sky, no land, no living thing. Then, as the waters moved, the waves dashed spray aloft, and foam; and the foam and the spray thickened into mist and rested above the waters and became the sky. But there was neither sun, nor moon, nor star. All was darkness. Kokomaht (God) dwelt beneath the waters—a nameless being made out of the Nothing—and he was two. And the twain made thunder beneath the waters, and the waters heaved, and up through the floods rose the first of the twain. As he passed through the waters he closed his eyes; then when he had risen he bathed his eyes and opened them and saw. So thus he stood upon the waters, seeing, and named himself Kokomaht, maker and father of all.

And the second of the twain called to Kokomaht from beneath the waters, and asked, "How went you up:—with closed eyes, or open eyes?"

And Kokomaht made answer falsely, thus: "As I came through the floods I opened my eyes."

Now the second believed, and as he rose he opened his eyes, and the waters rushed in upon his eyes, and behold! when he had come up through the waters he was blind. Kokomaht then named him Bakotahl, the Blind. And Kokomaht was good, and Bakotahl was evil.

So the twain stood upon the waters in the midst of darkness, for as yet there was no land. Kokomaht asked of Bakotahl, "Where is the north?"

Bakothal knew not, and pointed to the south. "No," said Kokomaht, "that is not the north."

But Bakotahl found not the north, for he was blind. Then said Kokomaht, "Behold, I will show you how to make four directions.
This is north.” And he pointed to the north. Then he walked upon the waters four steps northward and stood for a moment, and then came back to his starting-place. Then he said, “Lo, this shall be west!” And he walked upon the waters four steps westward, and stood for a moment and then came back to his starting-place. Even so he made the south, stepping four times southward; and the east, stepping four times eastward; and then at last he stood still at the central starting-place.

Then Kokomaht took the hand of Bakotaht (because the Blind One knew not the directions) and he pointed with it north, west, south, east. But the Blind, who saw not, would not believe. But he said nothing.

Then Kokomaht said, “Lo, now I will disperse the waters and make Earth!”

And the Blind, believing not, said, “How will you do this thing? Think you that you can make Earth in truth?”

“Yes, that can I,” said Kokomaht.

And the Blind said, “Let me be the first to try this thing.”

But Kokomaht answered, “Nay, I will not.”

And Kokomaht turned and faced the north and stooped over the waters and with his hand stirred the waters to a whirlpool. And the waters rose and then went down, and as they ebbed land appeared. And Kokomaht seated himself upon the earth.

Now Bakotaht was bad of heart because he might not make the land. He would have liked to go elsewhere. But he, too, seated himself upon the earth. Then he thought, “I will take of this earth and make a being, with head, arms, legs, feet and hands.” So he made of clay an image like a man; but it was not right. The hands were not divided into fingers or the feet into toes. When the image was finished Bakotaht laid it behind him where Kokomaht might not see it.

Now Kokomaht said in his heart, “I will make man.” And he took clay and made an image with head, arms, legs, hands and feet: it was perfect. “This is man,” he said. Then he made another image, and this one, too, was perfect. “This is woman,” he said. And he took the first image and lifted it and swung it back and forth four times, northward, and stood it upon its feet upon the earth. And behold, it was a living man! And he took the second image and swung it back and forth four times northward, and stood it on its feet upon the earth. And behold, it was a living woman!

Now Bakotaht had in this time made seven images, but he himself knew not what they were. And Kokomaht saw them and said, “What have you made there?”
And Bakothal answered, "Lo, these are men that I am making."
Then Kokomaht said, "Lift your hand and touch and feel these
that I have made."
And Bakothal felt of the man and the woman that Kokomaht
had made. They were perfect, with face, eyes, hands and fingers:
they were perfect.
And Kokomaht said to the Blind, "What then seek you to make
of these that you have made?"
And Bakothal answered, "Of all these I shall make men."
Now on the hands of his images the Blind had made no fingers,
nor upon the feet had he made toes. Kokomaht said, "What will
they do if they are hurt in battle? Behold, they have no fingers!"
Bakothal said, "If they are hurt, they will heal themselves."
Kokomaht said, "Behold, I have made fingers, yea, even finger-
nails. If one finger is hurt, it can be cut off, and there yet will be
four fingers left. And my people can hold things, for they can put
their fingers together, as one, even like the hands of your creatures,
or they can spread their fingers apart. All things can they do with
their hands."
And Kokomaht looked upon the images of Bakothal and beheld
how they were sore imperfect, and he lifted his foot and spurned them
into the waters.
Now Bakothal was angered and hot with rage, and he leaped into
the water, to make Sickness that should destroy the people of Kok-
omaht. And as he went down beneath the waves there was a noise
as of thunder. Out from the waters he blew a whirlwind*; but Koko-
maht lifted his foot and stepped upon the whirlwind and quenched it.
But the whirlwind was very strong and when Kokomaht lifted his
foot a little breath of the whirlwind slipped out, and this it is that has
brought all sickness to the people of the earth.
Now Kokomaht was alone, save for the one man and the one
woman, and these twain were the Cochans (Yumas). Then Koko-
maht made two people more, man and woman, and these were the
Cocopahs. Then he made the Dieguenos, man and woman, and
the Mojaves, man and woman. Then he stopped and pondered.
He had made people of four kinds. And now he worked again and
made the Apaches, then the Maricopas, then the Pimas, then the
Coahuillas, again people of four kinds. Then he labored again,
until he had made, in all, people of twenty-four kinds, and the last
twain that he made were the white people.

* Several Southwestern tribes believe that the whirlwind brings sickness, and
among some tribes medicine-men destroy the sickness by piercing the whirlwind with
an arrow.
Now behold all these living beings on the earth who knew not how they should live. And the first man, the Cochan, said to Kokomaht, "Behold, we know not how to live!"

And Kokomaht answered, "Think in your heart. You cannot be always a lone and separate being. Join with another, and bring forth children."

And Kokomaht begat a son, to teach the people, and the child was conceived of the Nothing and born without a mother, yet was he in form even as a man; and Kokomaht called him Komashtam’ho. And when the people understood, they lived no more apart as man and woman, but joined each with the other, and reared children unto themselves. Now when thus there were many people upon the earth, Kokomaht said, "Behold what I will do! It is dark; I will make light." So he made the Moon, and then the Morning Star.

Now the son, Komashtam’ho, as he waxed older began to ponder and think in his heart that he too would one day make something. The different kinds of people were now grouped in different places on the earth. But Kokomaht knew that his own work was finished.

Now behold, among the people was a woman, Hanyi, the Frog, and her heart was bad toward Kokomaht, and she fain would destroy him. So she crept down under the earth. Now Kokomaht knew her heart, for he knew all things, even the hearts of all the people he had made. But it was thus: Kokomaht himself willed to die, that he might teach men how to die, even as he had taught men how to live. For he knew that all men must die, else would the world be too full of people.

Now Hanyi crept down into the ground beneath the place where Kokomaht was standing, and she pulled out his breath till his throat was dry, and he wandered this way and that, knowing not whither he went. For Hanyi was a sorceress, and she had the power of the frog; for the frog has great power: if you throw it into the fire, it cannot be burned, it will jump here and there and then jump out. Kokomaht sickened, and lay down, and thought soon to die. Now there was no day or night, but only moonlight all the while; for as yet was there no light save that of the moon and of the one star.

So Kokomaht lay dying, and he called all his people about him, and they gathered, all save the white man, who lingered by himself in the west. The white man was crying because his hair was curled and his skin was white. Komashtam’ho looked up and beheld the white man sitting by himself in the west, weeping thus, and Komashtam’ho rose and went to him, and took a stick of wood, and set another stick of wood across it and said, "Here, you may ride this!" And behold, it was a horse! So he comforted the white man with gifts.
to ease his crying. For the white man was the youngest of all peoples; he was made the last, and he was even as a child, petulant and wilful, crying for all that he saw, and never appeased until all had been given to him. So unto the white man did Komashtam’ho give all the good things of the earth, for the Indians were older and could better bear deprivation and hardship.

So Kokomaht died, to show men the road of death, even as he had shown men the road of life. And now Komashtam’ho pondered in his heart how he might change the world so that there would be night and day. And he spat on his hand, and with his finger he rolled the spittle to a disc, and he took the disc and threw it to the east. Then he said to all the people, “This is the Sun, and it will move from the eastern sky to the western.”

Then he thrust the sun down under the earth, and the darkness returned. And now he spat on his finger and sprinkled the sky, and lo, there were many stars. Then he told the people, “Behold, these are stars. But you will see them only at night. In the day, you never will see them.”

But the people believed not, for Kokomaht, who had made all things, was dead.

Now Komashtam’ho would burn the body of Kokomaht; but as yet there was no wood for poles and logs—there were no cottonwood or willow trees, as now. So Komashtam’ho summoned the wood from the north, and when it was come he made a great funeral pyre.

Now Kokomaht, whilst he had lain nigh unto death, had called unto him the Coyote, and had said, “Take my heart. Be good. Do what is right.”

And the Coyote thought that Kokomaht meant that he should take the heart from Kokomaht’s body, and eat it.

Now all was ready for the burning, but Komashtam’ho knew that the Coyote had it in his heart to eat the heart of Kokomaht. So when the sun was rising, Komashtam’ho said to the Coyote:

“Go, fetch the light wherewith to kindle the fire.” And the Coyote leaped four times to the east and lifted his hand and reached toward the sunrise. And now, while the Coyote was thus gone seeking light, Komashtam’ho quickly took a stick and fitted it into a hole in a piece of wood, and twirled the stick between his palms till fire sprang from the end of it. Thus did Komashtam’ho show the people how to make fire, and so was the first fire kindled for the burning of Kokomaht. And Komashtam’ho lit the funeral pyre, for he would that Kokomaht’s body should be burned before the Coyote might return. Behold, all the people were gathered save the white
man, and he desired not to see the burning and stayed afar. But the people wept not, or mourned, for as yet they understood not what death was. Now the fire had been burning but a little time when the Coyote returned. The people closed in together about the pyre because they knew that the Coyote would try to leap upon the pyre to take the heart of Kokomaht. Among the people was the Badger, and he was so low of stature that the Coyote, at a bound, leapt over him, even upon the pyre, and seized the heart of Kokomaht. Then he leapt off at the other side, and ran swiftly away. All the animals who were fleet of foot chased him, but none could catch him.

Then Komashtam’ho called aloud after the Coyote; “You will nevermore do good. You will be a wild man with no dwelling house, and naught to call your own. You will steal, for you will of yourself own nothing, and for your thefts you will be killed.”

Thus Komashtam’ho proclaimed it before all the people, and they knew henceforth what the Coyote was.

The people stood all around the burning pyre and then they began to weep and cry. They understood not sickness and death, but Kokomaht had shown them that men must sicken and die. Yet the people could not believe that Kokomaht would not longer live among them, and they looked for him to come again. Then Komashtam’ho said,

“You will nevermore see Kokomaht. He has died. If he were to live, all men would live, and the world would not hold all the people who would be alive. This is why Kokomaht has died—to teach you.”

And the people wept. They thought that the Frog was afar, for she had run away from the people in the same direction as the Coyote. The people would fain have killed the Frog because she was a sorceress; the Frog knew this, so she hid herself under the ground. But now when the people wept, she came out and listened, and when she heard the people grieve she went down into the ground again and resolved, out of fear of the people, to move elsewhere. So the frog lives ever out of sight.

Now by the burning of Kokomaht all the country round about was set in flames and there was a mighty heat from the fire, so that forever afterward the land is hot.

When the great fire was over and all had been burned, the people sat together in the same place. But the Cocopah Indians wanted not to be close to the Cochans, and they stayed apart from them, and the Maricopas wanted to be near to the Cocopahs. But the Mojaves, Apaches and Dieguenos drew nigh to the Cochans, and so today these tribes live near together. Now, as the people sat, they saw a little whirlwind forming near the place where Kokomaht
had been burned. And the people rose up and said, "What is there?"
And Komashtam'ho answered, "That is Kokomaht. His spirit
is now soul only, and that is he. He will be elsewhere than here—
maybe north, or west, or east, or south. He will never tire nor hunger,
and he will always be happy. People, grieve not."
Thus he taught the people. When he had told them this, they
understood and watched, and saw a whirlwind all around the place
where the fire had been. Komashtam'ho said:
"He will always be happy, but I—I am not happy. Would that
he were alive!"
Now the Cochans believe that when they die, they go not to this
place or that, as the white people teach, nor are they punished or
rewarded. In death all men are equal. When they die, they are again
with those whom they love and who belong to them, no matter how
bad or how good they may be. But the life after death is fair, and
corn grows plentifully, and all are young and strong—happy with
those who love them and whom they love—and that is all.
Komashtam'ho now chose a man, Marhokuvek, to help him to
think and to plan all things that now must be made and all that now
must be done. Marhokuvek thought; then he looked upon the people
and said to them:
"Because you all have lost your father, you should cut your hair
as a sign of mourning."
So all the people cut their hair. And Marhokuvek called the birds
and the animals and cut their hair—for in the beginning the animals
were persons, even as men. Now when this was done, Komashtam'ho
thought, and he said:
"These animals and birds look not well thus: I will make of them
persons no longer, but animals." And now when they were just
wild animals, Komashtam'ho said:
"I would fain kill them all." But Marhokuvek said:
"Nay, do not that!"
So they called the Rain, for Komashtam'ho would cause a flood
that should destroy the animals. Now many of the beasts perished
in the flood, but not all; for if there should come so great a flood
that all the animals would drown, the Indian peoples would die of
the cold, for their country is hot because of the burning of Kokomaht
and so the Indians cannot bear cold. Marhokuvek told Komashtam'ho
to spare the animals for the sake of the people, and Komashtam'ho
stopped the rain. So the world is full of animals as well as
men, but the animals are wild, and since that time men and animals
live no more together, but are fearful of each other.
Now Kokomaht had had a dwelling house in the north. And
Komashtam’ho would not that the house should stay when Koko-
maht was dead. For when a man dies and his spirit goes forth, the
spirit of all that he possessed should follow him into the other life;
therefore the people destroy the earthly belongings of the dead man,
that the souls of these things may be still the property of him who is
gone. Also, when a man has passed to where no man may behold
him, it is not good to look upon anything that had belonged to him
who is gone. The sight of such a thing calls to mind the dead one:
we see his house, but him no more, and this keeps the heart ever sad
and makes such constant sorrow that he who is still alive sickens
with pining and with grievous thoughts. What we cannot help we
should not ponder upon, lest we grow weak of heart. Therefore
the Yuma Indians burn all that belonged to the dead man, the house
and all his things, and move elsewhere to a dwelling that holds no mem-
ory of the absent one. Never again may the name of the dead man be
spoken, and life for the remaining ones begins anew upon another road.

So Komashtam’ho would destroy the house of Kokomaht. He
took a pole and thrust it into the ground before the house and shook
it from side to side, this way and that, four times, till it pierced so
deep that, behold! water was all around the end of it. Then he
thrust the pole along making a rut, southward, and struck the house
with the pole, and it broke and fell. And the waters flowed all along
the rut made by the pole, and behold! this flowing water was the
Colorado River.

Now the people without fingers or toes that Bakotahl had made
were beneath the waters, and as the river passed by the Indian peoples
these people of Bakotahl’s making arose and floated down upon the
river. And behold! they were ducks, and water-creatures, with
webbed hands and feet. Komashtam’ho stood beside the river, and
knew who these creatures were, and he tried to catch them. But
they would not come near, and kept only in the water. Then Koma-
shtam’ho called to the young—the little fledglings, but they answered
not, nor came; so he said:

“You have wings, but you may not fly as other birds. You shall
remain forever near the water, as water-fowl.” And to this day
water-fowl are frightened of men, and come not near when they are
called, but speed quickly away.

Now Kahk, the Crow, was a good farmer. After the river was
made, he brought corn and seeds of all kinds. He flew southward to
the Gulf of California, stopping four times by the way and crying,
“kahk, kahk!” And at each of these four stopping-places a moun-
tain arose. So he brought seeds from the south, that the people
might plant after the overflow of the river.
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Some say that the mountains of the earth other than these four were made in the beginning by Kokomaht. When the land was not yet dry Kokomaht pushed the wet clay to this side and that with his hands, heaping it into mountains. Others say that the waves broke on the newly risen land, and, as they dashed up over the country, they destroyed not the land, but stayed as they were, hardened into mountains.

Now the peoples had been divided; some had gone here, some there; but Komashtam’ho would keep the Cochans ever under his protection. So he said:

“Behold, I am now only one, so I cannot thus be with you always, for I must sometimes be elsewhere. So I will become four. I will change my name: I will no more be Komashtam’ho, but Eshpah-kohmal, White Eagle.” And Komashtam’ho changed and became as four eagles. The Black Eagle, Eshpah-kwinyil, went to the west, where the sky always is dark with clouds and rain. The Brown Eagle, Eshpah-etsikwitsa, went to the south. This eagle has little power; he only dips in the water and catches fish to eat. The fourth eagle was called Eshpah-kwamait, which means Eagle-Unseen, for no man sees that eagle. The White Eagle was ever in the north, even from the time when Komashtam’ho changed himself.

When Komashtam’ho thus had become four, he dwelt no more among the Yuma people as a man, because all the peoples were divided: some had gone to the north, some to the west, some to the south and some to the east; so he might no more be in just one place. Yet he would ever guard and protect the Cochans, and in dreams give them power from Kokomaht. So Kokomaht teaches the people through Komashtam’ho in dreams, saying to them: “Think on me; follow my word, and bid the sick remember me!”

Bakotahl, the Blind, is under the earth, and all men know that he is evil. He is lying down beneath the ground, nevermore to come out, but sometimes he moves, and then the earth trembles and shakes; when he turns over, there is a noise as of thunder, and the earth opens and mountains crack and fall. And people say, “Lo, the Blind One stirs below!”

Kokomaht helps the good, but Bakotahl helps the wicked, and this is why in the beginning Kokomaht lied to Bakotahl and blinded him. For Kokomaht knew that Bakotahl was evil, and Kokomaht willed only good to men. All good is under the protection of Kokomaht.

Lo, this is the story of the making of all things, and of the beginning of the Cochans. People, behold, this is all!